DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 323 819 FL 800 241

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TITLE Let Us Gather Blossoms under Fire...
PUB DATE 21 Feb 90
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at a Conference on Literacy for a Global Economy: A Multicultural Perspective (El Paso, TX, February 21, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; Change Strategies; *Cultural Context; Cultural Pluralism; *Educational Change; *Experiential Learning; *Individualized Instruction; *Literacy Education; *Personal Autonomy; Reading Instruction; Relevance (Education)

ABSTRACT

Language and culture shape the meanings that are attached to experience and to text. Yet, it is often believed that literacy work can be standardized and formalized, industrialized and normalized, as if adult new readers constructed meaning differently from proficient readers. Workplace literacy programs too often teach the employer's meaning and family literacy programs teach the schools' meanings, pressuring learners to accept the interpretations of the dominant group. When literacy programs help students come to know and reflect on their own meanings, they help students come into their own power--instrumental, personal, and political. Standardization is seen as necessary to accountability. It is easy to tell whether students are learning what they need and want to learn by asking them to read, write, or talk about what they have learned. In the midst of pressure to systematize and homogenize, we must learn to personalize. Respect for cultural and linguistic background is not simply a matter of motivating, titillating, interesting, recruiting, or retaining. It has to do with dignity, power, strength, and authority. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Let us gather blossoms under fire...[1]

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Presented at "Literacy for a Global Economy: A Multicultural Perspective"
El Paso, Texas

February 21, 1990

I call this speech "Let us gather blossoms under fire." Although a war metaphor, which I usually prefer not to encourage -- because I don't believe that war is the way to peace -- I like the image of holding on to the soft, delicate, beautiful blossoms such as dignity and courage in the face of, often, outright attack. The image of strength in softness is important to me, so I've chosen this title.

When Carol invited me to come here to share my thoughts with you this evening, she told me that I could be "as controversial as I wanted to be." In the past year I've spoken to some groups with which controversial was definitely not OK, so I appreciated the tip about who she expected you-all to be!

But it made me think -- what exactly is controversial about the things I talk about? After all, controversy is in the eye of the beholder. In my speaking at conferences I don't try to be controversial -- I simply try to speak honestly. In a world run by Madison Ave., the Fortune 500 and multinational corporations, however, honestly naming reality means breaking taboos. It means using words like power -- words that strip away the polyester plaid and leave the guts showing.

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[1] From Alice Walker "While Love is Unfashionable"

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Most of us are here tonight because we believe that mainstream literacy work is not responding to students' unique situations, to their unique cultural backgrounds, to their linguistic and cultural richness. We are here to talk about these issues, to break taboos. We want a forum in which we can explore these issues, inform our own practice, join with others in our struggle to transform literacy work to a more responsive, grassroots, community-oriented mode. We are here to talk about honesty, mutual respect, honor and dignity.

But at the same time that we are struggling to maintain our commitment to multiculturalism there are pressures pushing us in the opposite direction. Pushing for the industrial model, as someone described it to me in Washington last month -- the assembly line, cost-effectiveness, efficiency. Pushing for goals that are decided upon by employers, rather than in partnership with workers, by the dominant class rather than by all classes, by whites rather than by all the rainbow, by males rather than by all persons. Our commitment to literacy work that respects individual dignity is under fire, in many ways.

But we still can gather blossoms, as Alice Walker says. She writes: "Let us be poor in all but truth and courage....Let us gather blossoms under fire." That's what this speech is about. Holding on to our dedication to education as a process of mutual respect, communication, empowerment and social change in the face of forces that would push us otherwise.

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I'd like to tell you my story. About four years ago I found myself living alone on some farmland out in the country in North Carolina, on about 12 acres of land. In order to take care of my land, I had to learn how to drive the tractor that came with it. Now, up until that time, I had always lived in cities.

Big cities. New York. Boston. Not places where you learn how to drive a tractor. As a matter of fact, I had never driven anything other than an automatic transmission car. Not even a riding lawn mower. And now I had to learn to drive a tractor. A Big Tractor. John Deere 1010. Green. Lots of green.

So, what did I do? I sent away for "The Book". Even though this tractor is about 25 years old, John Deere still distributes The Book. My neighbors, who knew I was a Yankee and a city person and a teacher -- they laughed. They still laugh over the story of how I sent away for the book to learn to drive the tractor. They were laughing because they thought I couldn't make **sense** out of the book -- they actually said to me that I didn't have the **sense** for it. They didn't mean that I wasn't smart, or that I couldn't read. They meant that book learning wasn't the same as experience and common sense, and I was lacking in both of those when it came to driving a tractor. I was missing the context for understanding the words in the book.

And they were right. I was very excited when I got the books in the mail; I sat right down and read them through, cover to cover. And when I got done, I sat down and cried because I constructed the meaning of those books in terms of my own experience. I cried because the books told me that I was alone and powerless. I cried because they told me that I didn't have the strength, the muscles, the knowledge, the background, the energy needed to learn to drive my tractor. I cried because the books taught me that there was a culture of farmers and farm equipment operators and farm equipment suppliers that is in a world very far from my world of New York and Boston and Syracuse, my world of universities and urban communities, and with a language all of its own. I was an outsider. **I was alone**. That's what the tractor books taught me. That's what they meant to me, alienated from the

world of experience that would give the words other meanings, that would connect the books to being able to drive a tractor. So I cried.

My neighbors came over the next week and they asked if I was ready now to learn how to drive my tractor. They had decided who would be my teacher -- a young man with lots of patience and agility! He drove while I watched, and then he parked it, turned it off, and told me it was my turn. I wanted him to drive it some more and he said no, I needed the experience myself. I told him that his experience could teach me and he laughed. He told me that I might be the teacher, and he the farmer, but this was something he knew more about -- I had to have the experience. So I drove the tractor.

Those of you who have driven tractors know it really is not very difficult. Emotionally exhausting for me, but not really physically difficult. So I did it. And I did it again the next week. And again the next. Until I began to know my tractor pretty well. I could fix it. I could start it when it wouldn't start. I could change the attachments and plow when I wanted to plow rather than bush hogging everything in sight. And then, once in a while, when I had a question and my neighbors were not around, I would return to the books. And now I could use the index to find information I was looking for. I could follow the drawings to identify the parts I had to buy at the farm supply store. I could read the text and then go out and do something that I had not been able to do before. **The meaning of the text changed as my experience changed. And my ability to get access to the information contained in the text changed as my familiarity with the larger context increased.** We all know this experience. Some of you have returned to a favorite book, years after the first reading, to find its richness shifted, reflecting your own growing. Some of you have watched a favorite movie again, years after your first viewing, to find it full of new meaning. When I

moved to the South, country music lyrics suddenly had new meaning for me, meaning they had not had when my only experience was in the culture of the urban Northeast. My tractor books became a set of tools for me, comforting and useful, connected to my neighbors' love and our shared battle for my empowerment, for my ability to take my place as a partner in the community.

Meaning is a very complex thing, connected at its core to culture and language. My neighbors of the culture of the American South attach meanings quite different from mine to the same things. For example, they think I cultivate weeds; I think I grow wildflowers. They think I have a yard of potential chicken dinners; I think I have pet chickens. They think I have a fire hazard; I think I have a field of beautiful golden broomstraw.

Literacy is fundamentally about meaning; it results from our interaction with the world and text. As we read our world, expand our experience, we reconstruct the meaning of text. And as we read the word, we transform our world. Language and culture shape the meanings we attach to experience and to text.

And yet -- we continue to be pressured to believe that literacy work can be standardized and formalized, industrialized and normalized, as if adult new readers construct meaning differently from proficient readers. Why? Because although we say that literacy is about meaning, not all meanings are created equal. First and foremost, schools are arenas to socialize, to transmit the meanings most useful to maintain the status quo. Too often, workplace literacy programs are teaching the employers' meanings. Family literacy programs are teaching the schools' meanings. So, we're told that there are right answers to standardized reading comprehension tests, answers that tell those in power that those who have no power have learned their place.

Their roles. They have agreed to the dominant group's set of meanings. They have learned that there is no room for their own.

This orientation to teaching students other people's meanings is important because power stems from our own experience -- our own meanings. When literacy programs help students come to know, reflect upon and express their own meanings, we help students come into their power: Instrumental power - they can do new things. Personal power - they feel more capable of doing new things - and political power - those who have been poor and disenfranchised can begin to demand a new voice as citizens. We know these truths from our experience.

We're told that this push to standardization is necessary for accountability. But we know how to tell if someone is learning what they need and want to learn. Just ask them. Ask them to read. To write. To talk about what they have learned, who they are, what it has meant to them. What their future looks like it could be, how their dreams have changed. Just sit down and talk with them. Now, we don't always find it easy to be open with each other, and we don't always like what we hear. And as students become more comfortable with their own power, and less prone to telling educators what they think we want to hear, it may become even less comfortable. This is not an easy process to work through.

But the issue with accountability and evaluation has to do with how to make claims for a system, how to amass data, how to aggregate and enumerate. Sometimes we forget that we know how to work with persons, we know how to tell if someone is learning. We know how to talk to each other. It's the system we're struggling with right now, not the individuals. In the midst of pressures to systematize we must remember to personalize. We must build a system in which every person is heard.

And we find that types of programs that were developed specifically to be responsive to individuals in their environments, such as family and workplace programs, are in danger also of becoming systematized to the point where their original rationale is lost -- their rationale of responsiveness and shared struggle. Dignity. Mutual Respect. Pluralism.

And resistance to pressures to homogenize is difficult because we're told it's for a global economy. But we have choices about the kind of global economy we want to create. Do we want a global economy based on exploitation and alienation? Or one based on peace and justice? We don't have to support the status quo to be good citizens of the planet. Universal starts with right here and now, with respect for our and our students' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. We all want to feel our lives have purpose and meaning; we all strain to discover the nature of work that will satisfy and feed our souls as well as our bellies. When we feel respect, and dignity and power, we work to create a better world. We know these truths from our experience.

Tonight we open a conference on multicultural, multilingual issues in literacy. Tonight we begin to create the space for our continuing dialog, we set our expectations about what will be taboo and what will be celebrated.

If we are to work effectively together we must be clear that respect for cultural and linguistic background is not simply a matter of motivating, titillating, interesting, recruiting, or retaining. It has to do with dignity, power, strength, and authority. We cannot separate literacy from experience, from culture and traditions. When forced to act as if we can, we serve others, not ourselves.

We know this work is not easy, and that many times we actually feel punished as we become more successful. Our programs and our students become more threatening to the status quo.

But let us take on the challenge. Let us enter into this conference, this next few days of meetings, with a promise to be true to our experience. To name our reality. To get centered in a sense of our own power that we can take with us back to our literacy practice, to our homes and our daily lives. By working together -- educators and new readers -- we have the collective will, the strength and the courage to continue fighting for peace and justice, for freedom and liberation. Let us, together, gather blossoms under fire.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank Beth Broadway, Jacqueline Cook, Jean Hammink, Sondra Stein, Annette Laico, Page McCullough, Jereann King, Jonathan Estes, Si Kahn, Tema Okun, O'Neal Jones, Dianne Ford, and Carol Clymer for their support and help in my process of learning to put these thoughts into words. I hope I have appropriately respected their knowledge, although I bear responsibility for these words.